

EO 13526 3.3(b)(1)>25Yrs

EO 13526 3.3(b)(6)>25Yrs

EO 13526 3.5(c)

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NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Possible Egyptian-Israeli Hostilities: Determinants and Implications

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NIE 30-73

17 May 1973

No

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NIE 30-73

POSSIBLE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI HOSTILITIES:
DETERMINANTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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POSSIBLE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI HOSTILITIES: DETERMINANTS AND IMPLICATIONS

PRÉCIS

Believing that perpetuation of the present Middle Eastern situation is intolerable for himself and for Egypt, Sadat is pressing ahead with his campaign of threats in the hope of inspiring US pressure on Israel. This could, over time, get out of control. But substantial Egyptian-Israeli hostilities appear unlikely in the next few weeks.

The danger probably will rise if Middle East debates in the UN Security Council (early June) and the Nixon-Brezhnev summit (late June) pass without any results Sadat considers useful. The US and the USSR have some, but limited, leverage in the situation.

— Among factors tending to precipitate hostilities:

Continuing diplomatic stalemate, combined with Egyptian conviction that hostilities would stimulate more active US and Soviet involvement in the settlement process

Egyptian calculation that hostilities would trigger anti-US action by the Saudis and other oil producers — leading to US pressures on Israel

Provocative actions by Egypt or other Arab parties and pre-emption or retaliation by Israel

— Among those tending to discourage hostilities:

Diplomatic movement Sadat could convincingly cite as evidence of progress toward regaining territory

A US move to distance itself diplomatically from Israel

Clear and continuing warnings from the USSR to its Arab clients

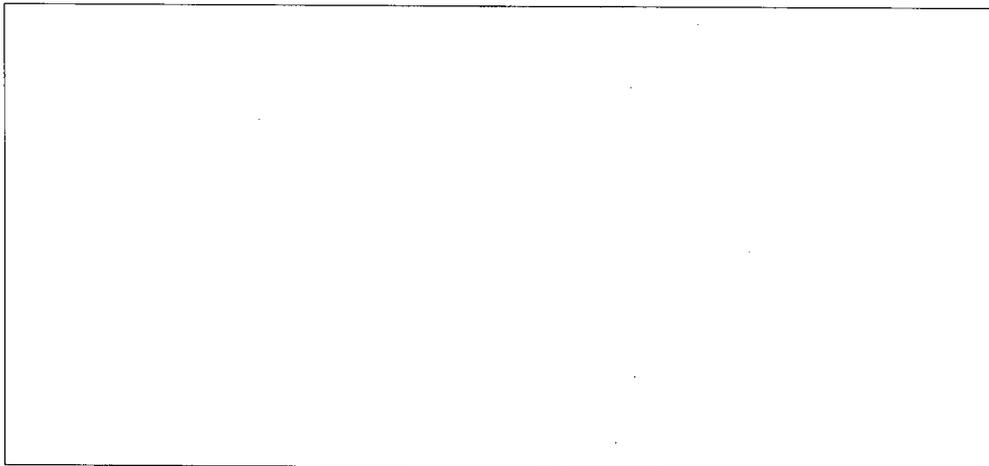
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Arab-Israeli hostilities taking place in 1973 would not involve wide-ranging ground warfare on the Egyptian front, as in 1967, or a long and continuing war of attrition, as in 1969-1970. There might be small, brief Egyptian commando raids or Egyptian artillery barrages—and then massive Israeli retaliation. And large-scale Israeli pre-emption would occur if Egypt appeared on the verge of an air strike against civilian targets in Israel.

Substantial hostilities which left Egyptian forces shattered by Israeli pre-emption or retaliation could have major consequences.

- US interests and the US presence throughout the Arab world would be subject to attack.



- The USSR would preserve its ties with Egypt, probably offering carefully measured amounts of replacement equipment in exchange for renewed access to military facilities and a greater role in Egyptian policy.
- Most major industrial nations would disassociate themselves as publicly as possible from US policy in the Middle East. [REDACTED]



- The already slim prospect of a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict would be eliminated—probably for years to come.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. THE PROBLEM

1. Sadat's new campaign of threats to renew hostilities involves public and private statements, military movements within Egypt, and the concentration of weapons and military personnel from other Arab states in Egypt and Syria. The actions are consistent both with preparations to fight Israel and with political/psychological efforts to stimulate diplomatic activity leading to settlement. This Estimate considers briefly the likelihood of substantial Egyptian-Israeli hostilities in the next few months, examines the ways in which actions of various governments, including the US, might increase or diminish the prospects for hostilities, and discusses the implications for the US if hostilities should occur.

II. SADAT'S CURRENT INTENTIONS

2. Sadat is under heavy pressure to achieve some progress toward recovering lost territory. Having been, in his view, responsive to US and UN initiatives and having ousted the Soviet military advisers, he now sees Israel consolidating its control and the US more conspicuous than ever in the role of Israel's arms supplier. He believes that for him and for Egypt, to do nothing is to perpetuate an intolerable situation.

3. Sadat does not yet appear committed to an attack on the Israelis. While military movements to date have put Egypt in a somewhat better position to launch a very limited military action, additional preparations would be required for any sizable move. Further, the campaign of threats and warnings probably is intended to continue through two pending events that offer Sadat another chance to bring pressure on the US (and thereby on Israel): Middle East debates in the UN Security Council (early

June) and the Nixon-Brezhnev summit (late June). Thus, hostilities appear unlikely in the next few weeks.

4. Psychological brinkmanship is no new tactic for the Egyptians. The war of attrition (1969-1970) was an Egyptian attempt to increase US anxiety and to force US diplomatic action toward Israeli concessions. It resulted, among other things, in US arms sales to Israel and devastating Israeli air raids on Egypt. In 1970, Egypt agreed to a cease fire and to enter indirect negotiations—through Jarring. In 1971, Egypt was willing to discuss with the US an interim agreement. These were all ways of seeking favorable peace terms. They all failed. Subsequently, Cairo switched tactics—trying to pressure Moscow and to appeal to the US.

5. In the period beyond the summit, Egyptian calculations may change. The danger of hostilities probably will rise if the UN debates and the summit pass without any results judged useful by Cairo. This does not mean that hostilities will then become inevitable or even probable. Sadat and his advisers remain aware of Arab military weaknesses. And they are not under compelling domestic pressure to go to war. But in the next few weeks or months the Egyptians probably will have postured, gesticulated, threatened, and talked themselves closer to the brink than they now are. Sadat wants a controlled crisis, but he cannot control the reactions of the many other parties involved. Moreover, intentions change with events; events can assume a momentum of their own.

III. ISRAEL'S POSITION

6. Israeli desires with regard to the summit are quite different from those of Egypt; Israel does not want the US to engage in serious

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discussions of the Middle East with the USSR. Israel wants the US to remain calm about the Arab-Israeli situation and will be particularly careful about contributing to military tension in the area at this time. But the Israelis [redacted]

[redacted] are apprehensive that any US-Soviet efforts to reduce tension would be at their expense. They will watch anxiously for signs of any change in the US position.

IV. WHAT MIGHT PRECIPITATE HOSTILITIES

7. The Egyptians believe deeply that progress toward solution of the Arab-Israeli problem on terms tolerable to Egypt can only come about through actions of the Great Powers. They were frustrated by the failure of the USSR to push the Egyptian cause in the Moscow summit of 1972. Their disappointment was reflected in, for example, the unceremonious ordering of the Soviet military withdrawal from Egypt. They are trying again to persuade the Great Powers to act, and the US is the principal target of their efforts. If Sadat is once again disappointed, the temptation to resort to military action in order to force the US hand might prove irresistible.

[redacted]

[redacted]

9. Sadat himself could be trapped by building up an atmosphere of crisis to the point where failure to act militarily would seem to him more dangerous to his own hold on power than attacking and taking the consequences. With Sadat proclaiming Egypt's total readiness for action, some other Arab party (e.g., Syria, Qadhafi, the fedayeen) could precipitate major trouble with the Israelis with the deliberate intention of dragging Cairo in. Thus, accidental Egyptian entry into hostilities could start with an attack on the Israelis—e.g., Libyan downing of an El Al plane, fedayeen provocations of some sort, Syrian actions in the Golan Heights—and lead to Israeli retaliation against Libya or Syria. In such a case, Sadat could be left with a nasty choice—issuing strict orders to Egyptian forces to remain inactive (belying his earlier threats) or joining the battle (bringing Israeli retaliation on Egypt).

10. A very convincing Egyptian posture of military readiness—well beyond what Egypt has undertaken so far—would bring greater risk of Israeli pre-emption. In present circumstances, the Israelis have more to lose than to gain by attacking Egypt. They have no strong incentive to occupy still more Egyptian territory. They probably no longer believe that force alone can compel Egypt to surrender diplomatically. They do not want to excite Great Power intervention. But if Egypt manages to assemble a military force that appears capable of doing damage to Israel and gives the appearance of being on the verge of attacking, Israel would act first.

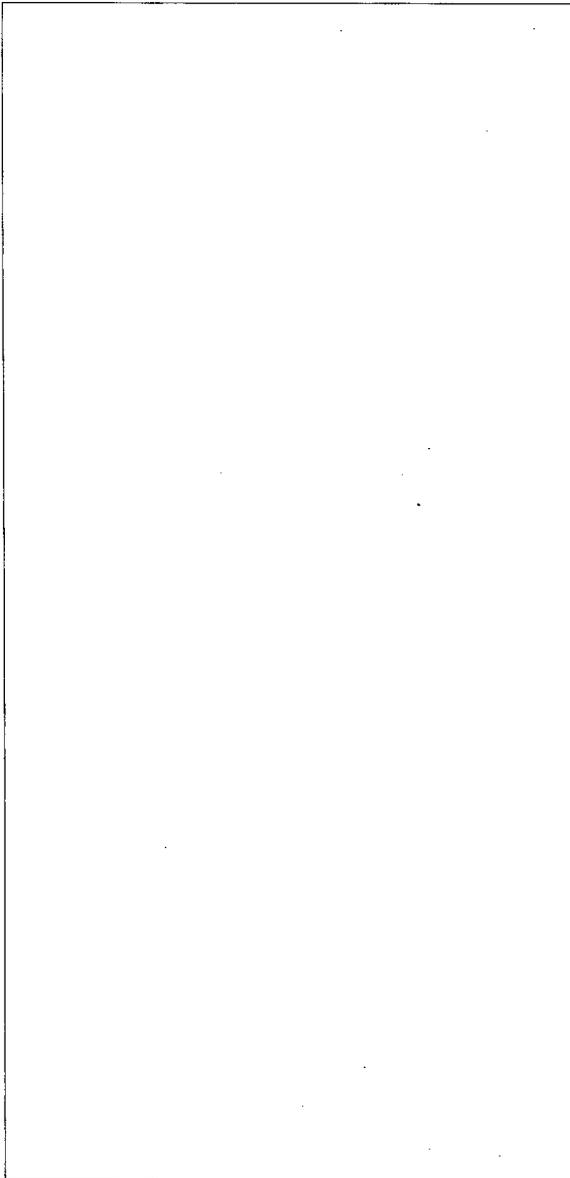
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V. WHAT MIGHT DISCOURAGE HOSTILITIES

11. The danger of Egyptian-initiated hostilities would, of course, decrease considerably if Sadat could claim that he was on the way to a satisfactory solution. Indeed, public hints and private promises of future progress might, for a time, provide him sufficient basis for a claim of progress.



[REDACTED] If Egypt does decide to initiate hostilities, it will do so in spite of the military consequences, rather than in hope of military gains.

15. The Soviets have been warning Sadat, and other Arabs, against military action and have made sure that those warnings become known in the US. The Soviets could face a choice between intervening directly in a new conflict or seeing another Arab defeat that would leave Moscow once again appearing a feeble ally to its Arab friends. Hostilities clearly could endanger the climate of détente with the US. Continued warnings from Moscow will be a discouraging but not necessarily a decisive consideration.

16. If they came to see the problem as one of great urgency, the Soviets would seriously entertain the possibility of a joint US-Soviet effort to forestall the outbreak of hostilities. In any discussion of such a prospect with Washington, they would of course continue to represent the Arab cause and ask for strong US constraints on Israel, seeking in this way to avoid Arab antagonisms. But they might also be willing to make parallel warnings, along with the US, to both sides to refrain from precipitate action. Such a course would appeal to the Soviets on several grounds: it would enhance the appearance of US-Soviet détente; further legitimize direct Soviet involvement in Middle Eastern affairs; and perhaps actually help to head off the conflict Moscow hopes will not take place.

VI. IF HOSTILITIES OCCUR—MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND CONSEQUENCES

17. A new round of hostilities coming in 1973 would be very different from previous encounters between the Israelis and their neighbors. The territorial situation is much changed from that of 1967; Israeli attempts to seize and hold additional Egyptian land

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18. Substantial Arab-Israeli hostilities cannot occur without the involvement of Egyptian forces. And if the Egyptians decide to go all out, despite the consequences, there can be a considerable military exchange. Since Egyptian capabilities are so limited, the participation of other, even less impressive, Arab forces—e.g., the Syrians—on a second front would matter little in military terms. Though Egypt cannot seize and hold any portion of the Peninsula in the face of Israeli opposition, it probably can, for example, conduct small, brief commando raids into the Sinai.² It can fire massively across the Canal with artillery. And it can attempt air strikes against Israeli targets.

19. Though Egypt's air arm is nothing like a match for Israeli forces, the marginally improved air attack capability could provide the occasion for new and substantial military action. Egypt now has a few Tu-16s configured to carry air-to-surface missiles; these planes are subsonic, but they provide a limited capability for standoff attacks against Israeli targets. And Mirage fighter-bombers newly received from Libya are more of a threat to targets in Israel than are the Soviet-supplied planes in the Egyptian inventory. Simultaneous air and ground attacks from Egypt and Syria might inflict some damage on Israel proper. Thus, if the Israelis thought any Arab air attack (Egyptians alone or in combination with others) on Israeli civilian targets or any large-scale Arab ground attack on

² See NIE 36.1-71, "Egypt: Continuity and Change," dated 22 December 1971, SECRET and NIE 36.1-72, "Egypt's Policy Dilemmas," dated 7 December 1972, SECRET for a detailed discussion of Egyptian military capabilities. The analysis there remains valid.

Israeli positions was imminent, they would move to eliminate the threat before it ripened. In attacking the concentrated Egyptian air defenses, they would suffer some losses, but their action would be deliberately scaled to leave hostile Arab forces shattered and Arab military ambitions and pretensions in shambles.

VII. THE SITUATION AFTER HOSTILITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

22. Egypt. Egypt, for its part, would remain unwilling to settle. Sadat probably could not survive another sizable military defeat at Israel's hands. He remains president largely by sufferance, because of the lack of an attractive alternative rather than because of his own

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popularity or achievement. Yet his successor probably would have as little choice as he in major policies.

25. **Algeria.** Algerian-US relations would be newly strained, but probably without serious repercussions on the major mutual interest of the two countries, a liquefied natural gas (LNG) agreement under which substantial shipments to the US will begin in 1977. The Algerians could be expected to speak harshly against the US and perhaps to take such symbolic steps as closing the US Consulate in Oran or the Interests Section itself. But they are highly unlikely to take steps that would seriously endanger a contract that was four years in the making and that involves credits to themselves of \$366 million through the Export-Import Bank and a potential annual income for Algeria of \$300 million.

26. **Western Oil Consuming Countries.** In the wake of Egyptian-Israeli hostilities, a clash of interests between the US on the one hand and the other oil consuming countries on the other might occur that could have indirect consequences of a serious and enduring kind.

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30. **The Soviet Union.** The USSR would have difficult decisions to make and would make them carefully. The Soviets would continue to champion the cause of the Arabs, and they might make overtures to the US for some sort of new peace efforts in the area. With regard to Egypt, however irritated they might be with Egyptian actions they would not wish to abandon their relationship with Cairo. Egypt, even after another defeat, would remain the largest Arab state and a state in a key strategic location. The Soviets would almost certainly undertake a military re-equipment program for the Egyptians, but it probably would be based on some sort of compromise between Egyptian desires and Soviet prudence—involving carefully measured amounts of equipment, new agreements for Soviet use of military facilities in Egypt, and a greater policy role for the Soviets.

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